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ABSTRACT

This paper reveals ways in which teachers can use roles and role playing to facilitate children's understanding and expression, by giving an example of a drama in which the teacher assumed a role. In this dramatic situation, a group of eight-year-olds and nine-year-olds was asked to assume the roles of American Indians whose valley was threatened by the building of a dam. Although the teacher did not instruct in a traditional sense, she was able to guide the children toward an understanding of the life of a tribe. The value of nonverbal modes of communication--painting, sculpture, music, movement, and gesture--is stressed. (KS)

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THE USE OF ROLE

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Betty Jane Wagner

There are at least three ways we might consider the use of role in expanding a child's language power. One way is to look at what happens when a child assumes a role, when he or she engages in a drama in the classroom to which he brings the energy born in spontaneous child's play outside the school. In other words, we might examine the value of role-playing, that unique classroom experience that takes advantage of the learning style every child brings into the classroom;

he shows us he learns by acting, by taking on a role. A second way to approach the use of role is to consider what happens when a teacher takes on a role and engages in a drama with a class. Or, a third way would be to consider the advantage of a teacher's setting up another person in role, using either full costume or a vestige of costume; then the teacher functions as a facilitator for the class's response to the person set up in role. This use of role has been developed the most fully by Dorothy Heathcote, the outstanding master teacher from Newcastle upon Tyne in England. She has been particularly successful in using another person in role in her work with the mentally handicapped.

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For this session, I am going to limit my discussion to the ways a teacher can assume a role herself and shall give you an example of a drama I recently facilitated by staying in role almost all of the time. When I assume a role I usually choose to be a not-too-powerful member of the group we comprise. By so doing I accomplish several things: First, I can minimize my major weakness, namely, that I have never had any theater training. I am free to let the group leaders emerge and assume the coveted roles; then I can function in role to make their leadership effective, using such comments as, "Our chief has called us together. Let us hear his words." Because I am fully within the drama and not a spectator, I can provide guidance without having to jump out of role and become a "director." I am also in a good position to set or reenforce mood. While moving with the drama, I feed in ideas and talk about what I am doing, thereby providing a model for the child. When something happens that I want all the class to attend to, I can recognize and focus on that event. "Our scout has returned; he looks as if he has good news." In role I can echo the words of a leader and can also build intensity by holding back action until everyone is ready to respond to a dramatic moment. "This magic stone has markings on it. Is there anyone here who can read these strange scratches?" At times I can in role oppose the group to create conflict and to unify the group against me. The problem with this, however, is that is often catapults me into a leadership position and can put a damper on the initiative of the children in the creation of the drama. If they decide I'm going to take over, why bother? Thus, I tend to oppose the group very seldom, and when I do, I try to do it as a spokesman for a group of the children, letting those who agree with my position take it up from my lead. My goal is always to sink back out of the limelight and into the group, letting the children carry as much of the responsibility for the drama as they can manage. At times, the most effective thing I can do is to be the member of the group who is not yet convinced, or is "not with it." I have to be shown and persuaded. The advantage of this stance is obvious; the class has to assume the responsibility of enlightening me about the reasons for their decision. Here is a powerful pressure for language. Perhaps the most important thing I do in choosing a role for myself is to select one through which I can press a class for reflection and, consequently, for language.

When leading a drama, I try to get into role as quickly as possible myself, and as I start believing my role and not jumping out of it to give directions as a teacher, the children pick up cues from me. It seems chaotic at first, always, because different children get into their roles at different rates. However, unless a child is clearly making it difficult for others to believe their roles, I simply concentrate on my own belief and let the ones who are having trouble take their time about "getting into" the drama. In the meantime, I look for concrete tasks for all of us to do, usually simultaneously, and almost always in movement rather than words.

Thus, if I am trying to get a group to feel like a tribe, I might start on a project that calls for the combined muscle effort of all the tribe members. We need to build a huge council fire. "Who is responsible for the twigs? Let's all break these into small pieces so they will burn quickly. . . Now where is the flint to strike a spark?" Then we go out to chop down the big trees to get the large trunks to keep the fire burning all night long. Ritualistically we labor together chopping and dragging tree trunks. Then together we build up the fire -- twigs, next small branches, then big logs, finally leaves and berries. I keep working on that fire until everyone is in a rhythmic, primitive pantomime; I've found that nothing helps children believe a drama faster than to stop talking and start moving to the cadence of a group task. By staying in role and disciplining myself to do all my leading as a member of the tribe, and a member with no special status, I find the children respond more wholeheartedly. I am playing their game; we are all discovering together just what this tribe is like.

I used this council fire building in a drama a colleague and I did recently with a group of eight- and nine-year-olds in our Demonstration School at National College of Education. The idea for the focus of the drama was not mine, but one I got last November at a preconference on Improvised Drama at the National Council of Teachers of English meeting; there I heard Baird Shuman, education professor at Duke, introduce a moral dilemma to the same group of children we were later to work with. This group met for an hour in a demonstration session with Baird Shuman and were eager to continue what he had started when we next met with them. He had presented a problem he had read about in a newspaper account. It may seem too stark and tragic for children of this age, but

Dr. Shuman and I both discovered that these eight- and nine-year-olds were not only ready but could come very much alive to this kind of crisis. The problem was this: According to the short news account a Brazilian tribe of Indians, the Moqui, whose society had heretofore been isolated from that of the white man, was facing the coming of white strangers who were assigned to cut down the trees in their valley at the headwaters of the Amazon River. This lumbering operation, which, of course, had all the appropriate governmental permits, led to a confrontation with the Moqui tribe; when the Indians sensed that they would be defeated, they decided to kill their own babies rather than see them grow up under the domination of an alien culture, the people who were sending the lumbermen into their valley. The problem for the Brazilian governmental officials was, of course, to decide whether to intervene on the side of the law against murder or to let the Moqui tribe determine its own destiny. Certainly a problem of this magnitude stands in sharp contrast to the usual pablum all too often [illegible]d up in the name of language arts or social studies curriculums. This moral dilemma, like all true human crises, was set in the matrix of age-old questions of value that underlies the group consciousness of human communities.

From the initial discussion Shuman had with this group, it seemed clear that they were not going to even consider killing their own babies; nor were they really interested in the alternatives the white man faced -- that of intervening or not. Rather, they were eager to turn the drama into a stereotypical Indian war with the white man. At the end of the first session, the one held in front of the adults at the preconference, the children were busy making elaborate plans for battle. Their will was engaged; they were disappointed to run out of time before they could begin their fight with the white man.

When I met with the group a few days later in the usual setting of their own school, I found them as eager as ever to start fighting. Although I was happy they were ready to identify with the Indians rather than the whites, I was determined not to have the drama turn into a war. I wanted to see if I could help them understand, from the inside, what it would be like to be so pressed as a culture that you would even contemplate such an unconscionable act as participation in your own group's genocide. Because the class was in the throes of a long unit on water, and because I was dead set against leading them into a war, I changed the problem they faced from an encroachment by

lumbermen to the fact of the building of a dam downriver from their valley. I decided that a gradual rising of the river would be harder to fight back with bows and arrows than teams of men with chain saws would be. So we began our drama on the banks of the river, fishing with the huge, sharpened spears the tribe was so eager to use. The fishing was intense; as they worked they talked about the problem of the white men building a dam on this sacred river. As a tribe member, I sat on the banks and wove a reed basket for the fresh fish.

After everyone had had time to get into the task of fishing, Ashew, the tribe's leader, pulled out a fish that had 25 fins. All gathered around to look. Our witch doctor declared it to be a bad luck fish. What was to be done with this evil omen? Several tribe members had suggestions; to each the chief answered in traditional laconic Indian sentences. On girl caught the rhythm of his remarks in her story written later:

> It was a sad day for the Moqui tribe when Ashew caught the evil fish. . . Some people said, "Let's throw the fish in the river. The chief said, No, Bring bad luck to river. Some said, Burn it. Witch Doctor said, Bring bad luck in air. Old Witch Doctor found a book that said, If you touch eyeballs evil spirits will come.

So no one touched the eyeballs, and the tribe decided to risk burning the fish, but that was not the end of their troubles. Again to quote from a child's paper:

> We started to get wood and we made a circle with stones around the fire so the fire wouldn't spread and we waited and waited and when the fire went out the bones were still there."

Fear remained with the bones. The next day the white men came (they were two volunteers who left their tribal roles temporarily), and the tribe heard the worst. They were going to have to leave the valley they loved. To intensify that moment, I stood holding my baby in my arms and said, "The ghosts of our fathers still fish in this sacred river. I shall not live to see our children grow up apart from the power of this tribe." I pressed them, in role all the while, to sense the desperation of a people who could not contemplate going on without the symbol of their heritage, in this case a sacred river. Because by this time I was clearly one of the tribe; my attitude could not be considered alien. The problem I faced was their problem too. They began to pick up the challenge my somber decision posed.

"Maybe we could let these babies live and just not have any more."

"Maybe we could move somewhere else."

I shook my head slowly. "But our children would never know this valley."

Again the tribe talked about fighting the white man. "It's not fair; we'll have to kill them, not our own babies."

As we talked, the river slowly began to rise. The children backed up reluctantly, gathering their baskets and spears as they watched the water inch toward their homes. One tribesman refused to move and insisted on standing there as the water rose around him. Soon he was swimming bravely in defiance of the flood.

It was then that two tribe members whom I had coached earlier came up to the group in role as very reasonable white men offering us another valley, just as good, but one that would not be flooded. The children were visibly relieved. The prospect of killing our babies, whom most of the girls and I were by this time holding in our arms, was too horrible to contemplate. The next task was to prepare for the journey.

In role I pressed them again. We couldn't just pack up; we had to face the fact that the journey would be long and difficult; we could carry with us only what we could pack on our backs. One boy insisted we had horses, but I quickly pointed out that these two horses would have to be saved to carry the old and the sick. Thus we were under pressure to decide what to leave behind. Before long the children themselves came up with principles of selection. "Let's take the baby's cradle."

"No, we can make a new cradle; we'll only need to take our tools."

In role, as always, I decided to take one thing we could show our children and grandchildren to let them know what this river valley was like. The children picked up this lead.

Then we traveled -- through jungle, over desert, across a wide river in canoes -- until we finally reached the new valley. It was perfect, of course, and before long the men were dragging in bear, deer, and whales for our lunch. In the meantime, I was making preparations for our first council fire in the new valley. One of the men found a cave, and we decided to make it our sacred gathering place; after we built up a good base for our council fire there, the chief called the tribe in and asked the witch doctor to light the fire. Then each of us hung onto the cave wall the one thing we brought with us to remind

us and our children of our sacred valley. I brought the old feathered ceremonial robe of our first chief; then Little Kitten, one of the oldest women of the tribe, came up with a necklace that had belonged to her great, great grandfather, the first chief, and on it we discoverd an amulet that had great power. Another child brought a stone from the Sacred Amaxon so the River God would bless us in this new land. Then came the expected weapons of all sorts, and, finally, a magic stone the chief had brought. We all looked closely at it; then we called the witch doctor. One child saw an inscription, but none of us could make it out. We passed it from hand to hand in perfect silence. The moment was intense. Finally, the old witch doctor, father of our present one, "read" the words: "Peace, power, love." We all agreed that this was truly the law of our tribe.

I hadn't taught in any traditional sense; I had simply stayed in role and worked together with a class to discover the life of a tribe. Between the five 45-minute class sessions my co-teacher -- who also worked in role as a tribe member -- and I would meet to figure out how we would set up the beginning of the next session and would take whatever responses the children gave us and focus their group efforts, providing pressure for making tough decisions whereever possible. What evolved went far beyond what we had planned. What happened to those children was not just language development; it was more than they could verbalize, but it stayed with them. I went back to that classroom last week -- four months after we had been in that Amazon valley together, and I asked them to draw a picture of one thing they remembered from our drama of the Moqui Indians. The bad luck fish, the journey, the names of each of the tribe members -- all were remembered. That experience had been real.

It is because of experiences like this that I take issue with the theme of this Conference. Although "Expanding the Boundaries of Language Study" points in the right direction, it makes an assumption that I cannot affirm, namely, that a person can know only what he can put into words. The subheading of the Conference theme reads, "The boundaries of my language are the boundaries of my world." This quotation belies the obvious fact that a child, and indeed an adult as well, always knows far more than he or she can put into words. This is why the nonverbal modes of expression -- painting, sculpture, music, movement and gesture -- are valuable in extending a child's means of processing his experience beyond what he can put into mere language. I don't mean to

imply that language is not the critical mode of communication, but simply to remind you that it is never the boundary to one's world.

It follows then that I do not agree with the statement in this Conference's theme that we restructure our curriculum "so we can help children gain a multifaceted perception of their language and their world." In truth, young children need very little perception of their language as such; they have quite enough to do to make sense of their world and to use language as one way to share that understanding with others. It is we, the teachers, who do need to perceive language, to know how it is acquired and how its power is expanded in the stimulating social world of the child. If, instead of teaching a child about his language, we concentrate on giving him or her opportunities for wholehearted struggle with significant questions, questions that lead to an understanding of the world, we shall inevitably become partners in his language development as well.

There are many ways to set up classroom situations that evoke this struggle with significant questions -- telling and reading strong, powerful literature, such as the folk tales eloquently defended on psychological grounds by Bruno Bettleheim in The Uses of Enchantment, interacting directly with the concrete, real world and then reflecting on that interaction, and gaining perspective on human situations through the imagined world of drama. By assuming a role and joining a child in his dramatic play, we find ourselves engaged in an act that is ancient. All primitive rituals have at their heart the assumption of role -- wearing a mask, acting out one's fears or dreams, weaving oneself into a group fantasy. When we as adults assume a role ourselves and join our children in a group created drama, we discover that, like children, the boundaries of our language are not the boundaries of our world.